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**When Torture is Dismissed
The African World
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Many people on the Left have difficulty addressing the issue of torture. Certainly when the torture is carried out by imperialists, there is no problem condemning it. But what happens when torture is carried out by organizations or governments that claim to be progressive, anti-imperialist, or even on the Left? At that moment there is often silence, sort of a freeze-frame.

Most recently I have found myself badgered by emails from an insulting individual who happens to be a fanatic supporter of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. On one level, this is par for the course. Despite my stand on countless issues, there exists a small collection of individuals who believe that the sun rises and sets based on one's stand on President Mugabe. Thus, due to my criticisms of the Mugabe clique, I have become el Diablo. So be it.

What was interesting, however, was that in both this experience as well as several others, when I have raised that I know people - not just know OF, but know people - who have been tortured by the Mugabe regime, there is complete silence. The statement is not even acknowledged. Then the silence breaks and the polemics continue as if nothing was ever mentioned.

In general, the Left has four main responses to allegations of torture carried out by progressive organizations and/or governments. These include:

- *Denial*: It is all a lie; never happened.
- *Minimize*: It is an aberration, committed by rogue elements.
- *Silence*: let's pretend that it will all go away.
- *Relativism*: it may have happened, but it is not as bad as what the capitalists do.

We on the Left are so afraid that any acknowledgement of a crime committed by a progressive or so-called progressive will give aid and comfort to the enemy that we respond in such a way as to discredit ourselves and our mission. I understand this. In the 1970s and early 1980s I could not believe allegations that were made against the Khmer Rouge in Kampuchea/Cambodia. I simply could not believe that a political movement that had carried out such a heroic struggle against a US puppet regime (Lon Nol's) and united the country would descend into such fanaticism. Yet they had and each time that criticisms were raised and went unanswered by segments of the Left, our credibility plummeted.

Today we have the case of the Mugabe regime. At this very moment there is an attempt at a unity government between the Mugabe group and the main opposition (Movement for a Democratic Change). Such an effort should be supported, including by the dropping of sanctions that have been instituted by the USA and other countries. This, however, does not clean the slate. Torture, including rape-as-repression, has been too widely documented to dismiss. While the people of Zimbabwe will have to settle their own accounts in a manner that they deem appropriate, that does not mean that those of us on the outside can or should remain agnostic, and it certainly should not mean that we live in a world of denial.

If the Left is to hold the moral high ground it must mean that it is prepared to engage in criticism, including constructive criticism, when crimes are uncovered. Certainly every action must be put in a context, and there is no doubt that actions are at times carried out by or in political movements and governments that are not sanctioned by the leadership. Yet when there is a pattern, any and every attempt to dismiss it weakens our ability to insist on a practice of consistent democracy. If torture is wrong when carried out by pro-capitalists, for example, both because it is unreliable as well as immoral, how then can we on the Left tolerate it under any circumstances? How can we so quickly dismiss as 'fabricated stories' the reports of rape-as-repression whether they emerge from Zimbabwe or from the Sudan? The fact that these matters are reported by the mainstream white, capitalist press does not mean that they can be rejected out of hand. It should mean, instead, that we take investigation seriously in order to uncover the truth and separate that from pro-imperialist dis-information.

The case for self-determination and sovereignty for Zimbabwe and against any efforts by the USA, Britain or any other country to destabilize the situation is not helped by denial of the often vicious repression (including torture) that has been meted out against the opposition. If anything, denial is met with an unanticipated consequence at the mass level: democratic-minded people can often naively throw their support for so-called "humanitarian interventions" by the big powers.

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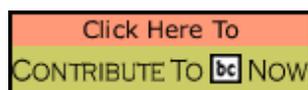
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